DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 908 RC 017 206

AUTHOR Benay, Jeffrey; And Others
TITLE A Minority Viewpoint: Looking at School from the Perspective of At-Risk Native American Students.
PUB DATE 28 Apr 88
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the New England Research Organization (April 28, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Education; American Indians; *Classroom Environment; Educational Research; Grade 9; *Group Discussion; *High Risk Students; Junior High Schools; Low Income; Public Schools; Social Bias; Student Alienation; *Student Attitudes; Student Needs; *Student School Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Empowerment; Native Americans

ABSTRACT

This study of school climate elicited from 12 American Indian ninth graders a sense of how they perceive their school. The inquiry does not examine the practices of teachers and administrators, but is concerned instead with statements made by the students themselves. A process of group questioning and continuous observation during group discussions provided data and gave students the opportunity for experiential learning. The population consisted of 12 low-income Abenaki Indian children, who discussed their likes and dislikes about school. The data suggest ambivalent feelings held by students about school. While they raised common concerns about respect, belonging, hygiene, equality, and control in their school environment, the students still expressed a desire to be there. As they viewed a system which, in their minds characterizes them as inferior, they were searching for recognition outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The study was valuable not only for researchers but for the students, who were empowered by being able to express some of the frustrations they feel in school. Their expressions of frustration were echoed by others, including teachers, in their respective educational positions. Implications for future study are discussed. (TES)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED310908

A Minority Viewpoint: Looking At School From the Perspective of At-Risk Native American Students

---

Focused Planning Model: Action Research to be Presented at the New England Research Organization Annual Conference
April 28, 1988

Jeffrey Benay, Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union
Kenneth Hood, University of Vermont
William Williams, Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC017206

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
William Williams
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ISSUE

The initial focus of effective schools research was to ascertain whether schools could be responsive to the needs of a low socio-economic student population. Earlier research concluded that poor student performance was a function of family background (Coleman, 1966; Jencks, 1972). Effective schools literature argued, however, that such an explanation ignored the powerful influence of principals and teachers with whom students interact. If some schools could be located which were effective in teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds, a conclusion could be drawn that the nature of a school can make a difference in the level of student learning.

Crucial to any discussion about effective schools is the notion of school climate. In this project, climate will be defined as the general beliefs, norms, expectations and feelings which characterize a school's social system (Brookover et al., 1982). Effective schools proponents maintain a school must commit itself to building an environment where all students believe they can succeed. The issue to be explored in this project relates to student perception about school. The body of effective schools

research has largely focused on the adults in a school environment, examining their practices and beliefs. This project focuses on the beliefs and impressions of the students. A group process model will be used to elicit from students the attitudes that reflect their circumstances as students at a local high school.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature on effective schools conveys significant importance attached to school climate. Extensive instrumentation has been developed to gather information about climate (Lindelow and Mazzarella, 1981; Moos, 1979), and many schools systems include an attempt to gauge climate in their initial steps for self-assessment. The importance of school climate is evidenced by the voluminous research undertaken to explore the deleterious effects of a poor school climate. Persell (1977) offers findings which demonstrate that lowered teacher expectations can impact negatively on student motivation. The research to date indicates strongly that school climate plays a major role in promoting or stifling student development.

Although much of the effective schools research has been conducted with elementary school populations, Neufeld,

Farrar and Miles (1983) conclude that the social systems of secondary schools are also related to achievement. While some aspects of the effective schools research have limited applicability in high schools (Firestone and Herrott, 1982), climate is a powerful indicator in any learning situation.

Given the overwhelming research support for the role of climate, public school attention is not surprising. Included in the local high school's statement of philosophy and objectives is a heading: HUMAN ENVIRONMENT AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS. It reads:

"The school shall provide students an atmosphere which emphasizes self-worth, the value of all life, and positive, cooperative interaction with others, leading to a responsible approach to adulthood.

Objectives

1. To develop cooperative relationships among parents, teachers, and students.

2. To impart social and ethical values by example and encouragement.

3. To provide students with a sense of self-worth and the means of self development.

4. To give each pupil an opportunity to strengthen self-respect and develop respect for others.

5. To teach problem-solving skills through individual and group problem solving experiences.

6. To prepare students to work independently and with their peers, both as leaders and as group members.

7. To encourage participation in extra-curricular programs of intramural and interscholastic activities.

8. To provide awareness of choices for societal roles available to individuals as workers, parents and citizens.

This well articulated mission statement conveys a positive school climate. Nonetheless, stated beliefs and actual practices are sometimes incongruent. The focus of this project's inquiry is to elicit from twelve Abenaki ninth graders a sense of how they perceive their school. This inquiry does not examine the practices of teachers and administrators from an objective observer's point of view. Rather, we will concern ourselves with statements made by

the students themselves pertaining to their perceptions of the school climate.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Data collection

The focus of inquiry in this project is to determine student perceptions of school climate. The purpose is to accumulate sufficient knowledge to lead to understanding. Group questioning and continuous observation will provide data from which grounded theory may emerge. This questioning involves a process of posing "entry questions" to small groups of respondents. The answers are then "probed" by a facilitator to gain further information. The responses are assimilated by an observer, who reports his understanding to the students in the form of general statements. The students are then asked to react to the accuracy of the statements using a Likert scale.

In many climate studies, surveys or questionnaires are utilized. While such indices can be administered quickly to large numbers of subjects, they are usually inflexible instruments which are answered in relative isolation. The interview process used in this project permits respondents

to move back and forth in time. It allows for greater depth than other methods of data collection. The questionnaire is often shallow in its probe, failing to provide a true picture of opinions and feelings (Borg and Gall, 1963). Flexibility, adaptability and human interaction are strengths unique to the interview as a data collection method.

As people live in groups, work in groups, and interact with friends, it is my intention to operate within a setting that allows for social interactions among students. Thus, this study provides for both product-related information and process oriented learning. Students will be asked to participate in a session that will yield data while also providing them with an opportunity for experiential learning. Kurt Lewin postulates that such adherence to "group dynamics" can affect a learner in three ways: 1) cognitive structures are altered; 2) attitudes are altered; and 3) repertoire of behavior skills is expanded (Johnson and Johnson, 1975). Group participation is an important aspect of this project. As the students become more involved, they should become more vested in expressing themselves. This high level involvement can yield data which is far richer and more complex than responses to a

static questionnaire. Part of this study's aim is for students to internalize a process in addition to gaining information about their perceptions of school.

B. Selection process

A subpopulation of low socio-economic students has been identified within the school. This population consists of 32 Abenaki students enrolled in the ninth grade. Students in the ninth grade have impressions and feelings about school which are relatively fresh. The Abenaki community is a poor one. Low income, little job training and underemployment characterize the community. 80% of the members fall below low-income guidelines as established by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Of this figure, 37% are classified as very low-income (Needs Assessment, Abenaki Self-Help Association, Inc. 1982). A cross section of these 32 students has been chosen with an even distribution of males and females. Twelve students have been identified and invited to participate. Two groups of six will be formed. The group oriented interview process outlined above is most effective when administered in small groups of 6-8 individuals (Borg and Gall, 1963).

PLAN OF STUDY

1. Location
2. Facilitators
3. Interviews
4. Summary statements
5. Validation

1. Location: In order to provide for easy access, greater trust and privacy, the session will be held away from school. A local restaurant with ample room for discussion groups will be chosen.

2. Facilitators: In an attempt to control for bias, two individuals will be invited to facilitate group discussion with the students. No mention of the character of the population or other leading information will be provided.

3. Interviews: Facilitators will lead small group discussions centered around answers to questions relating to school.

4. Summary statements: Upon completion of the morning discussion groups, I will meet with the facilitators to combine our impressions. I will then report to the students

a summary of themes that reflect our understanding of their comments.

5. Validation: Students will then be asked to rate the accuracy of my statements using a Likert-type scale.

IMPLEMENTATION

I sent a letter home to all parents of the students (see attached) explaining the session. I then met with each parent to further explicate and answer any questions. A van picked the youngsters up at school at 8:30 a.m. on Friday, May 8th and transported them to a Sheldon restaurant. Once there, I divided the students into the two groups. They formed circles at two ends of a large room. I introduced them to the facilitators and distributed 3x5 index cards and pencils. I indicated to them that an audio tape of their responses would be made for the purpose of examination.

A. Interview process:

1. Ask students to write responses to questions on 3x5 card.

2. Ask students to share their responses one at a time. Record on large paper for all to see.

3. Verbalize list so that other group can hear.

4. Record on large paper.

5. Ask students to explain likes and dislikes and record.

6. Verbalize explanations to other group.

B. Interview questions:

1. "Write three things that come to mind when you think about school."

2. "Think about a school where money is no object. You are responsible for hiring teachers and deciding what will be taught. What would the building look like? What would be taught?"

DATA

A. Responses to questions

1. Write three things that come to mind when you think about school.

Group Y	Group Z
sports	too much homework
teachers have more privileges	detention policy
teachers too strict	80% in math or incomplete

rules too strict

not treated fairly

condition of school not good

longer time between classes

seniors get more privileges

suspension/expulsion policy

unfair rules

many classes to choose from

some good teachers

a. Explanations of responses: (quotes selected from actual remarks made by students)

Group Y

Sports

"If you have the name or money you get special treatment. We're not the same out there."

Not enough variety; not fair that girls can't play hockey; football a good idea - more teams, more chances to play; different rules for different kids - some don't tryout and still make the team.

Teachers

"He's a good teacher. He don't act like God. We all learn something in there."

Different treatment for different kids; think they have too much authority; don't teach what we can understand; Mr. _____ treats us fairly - helps us, polite; Mr. _____ acts like our parent - helps us with problems; double standard - one for them, one for kids; teachers should obey same rules as kids.

Rules

"Good athletes get special treatment. They get a break on rules. It's not the good students who get 'specials', it's only good athletes."

Should be simpler; principal sides with teachers; OK for teachers to push kids but not other way around; should be fewer rules but those should be enforced; if you got alot of money, you don't get into trouble.

School condition

Papers all over floors; locker areas a mess; no soap or towels in bathroom; not enough windows; cold in winter.

Group Z

Rules

"When we miss classes, it only hurts us."

Too many demerits for each offense; allowed to chew gum in some classes, not in others; out-of-school suspension doesn't work.

Teachers

"Some teachers make things really interesting. They care."

Some give too much homework; some don't explain assignments; in math 80% means we get so many incompletes that we can't catch up; some real good teachers because they care; some teachers really listen to you; guidance people listen; some force you into doing stuff you don't know how to do.

2A. What would the building look like? (Note: Time limits imposed unfortunate constraints on the answers to this section. The area is certainly worth further exploration)

Group Y

Multi-floors, a floor for each subject; nice looking; swimming pool; student lounge; windows and doors; good

heating system; walls between classrooms; good weight room; cafeteria with wide selection of food; computer center; good equipment in mechanic shop; new books in library; good lighting; A-V center; good musical equipment.

Group Z

Closed off cafeteria; elevators; add two floors for more room; close in classrooms; fix up bathrooms (put in cabinets so we don't run out of supplies); more windows; new lockers with more room; student lounge; separate shower stalls; bigger nursing station; soundproof rooms; bigger lab tables; furnish guidance offices with larger couches; bigger computer rooms; swimming pool; better gym equipment.

2B. What would you be taught?

Group Y

Math (needed for jobs); English (written/oral); Foreign languages (French, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Italian, Spanish and German); Cultural (learn about other places); Boating (sailing and mechanics); Small engine, automotive and jet engines; Exercise class (weights, aerobics, hot tub, sauna and trainer); Driver education (for everyone); More

science classes; More Social Studies classes; Art (drawing and painting); Fashion design.

Group Z

Math (everything); Social Studies (about the world, famous people, things in past); English (spelling, reading, writing reports, letters); Science (chemistry and body parts); Foreign languages (French, Spanish, Italian, German); Computers (how to use them); Health education; Driver education; Automotive repair; Woods; Child development.

B. Summary and validation

"Based on what you have been saying all day, it seems to me there are five categories or themes that have emerged. Please listen to how I describe them and then rate my description of these. You want to rate how accurately I am saying what you mean. Use a scale of 1 to 10, with one being very inaccurate and 10 being very accurate."

"I see the themes of respect, belonging, hygiene, equality and control as being important.

1. When you think of respect, it is that some people don't listen to you or are sometimes rude;

2. When you think of belonging, it is that in some areas you don't feel like you're a part of the school like in sports;

3. When you think of hygiene, it is that when referring to things like the building you wonder about the conditions of the bathrooms and lockers and the overall appearance of the school;

4. When you think about equality, it is that in some cases you feel that different social classes get different treatment;

5. When you think about control, it is that you wonder about the discipline system including the use of demerits and you question different standards for kids and teachers."

Mean Responses for Each Category

(Based on twelve responses per category)

RESPECT:	9.5
BELONGING:	9.5
HYGIENE:	9.5

EQUALITY: 9.8

CONTROL: 9.8

C. Observations

Upon entering the restaurant, the youngsters huddled in small groups nervously. They explored the building tentatively and seemed relieved when they were called into groups. When the students were given their first question, there was some fidgeting in each group. Once they were asked to share ideas all were attentive to each facilitator. Most students in each group responded when explanations were asked for. Affect was high as students volunteered information, offered clarification and engaged in discussion among themselves. When the facilitator would report back to the other group, attention was extremely high. Every child sat attentively in his/her chair and listened carefully to the facilitator.

As we moved into further discussion and our second hour, there was some fidgeting. Within minutes, however, all youngsters were once again focused on the task. Full participation by both boys and girls was evident as they listened to one another, sharing and laughing. Each group of six remained as a cohesive group, with none of the

huddling in two's and three's that had been observed initially.

We moved into the third hour after one break. There was occasional slouching and inattentiveness, yet overall the students remained focused. At that time, we stopped for lunch and the youngsters were very excited about ordering from the menu. They maintained overall composure with some giggling. They all exclaimed about the huge size of the portions they were going to eat. The adults ate at a separate table and observed the youngsters enjoying themselves.

Following lunch, the whole group came together for validation of my comments. The students were very attentive, genuinely wanting to hear my remarks and anxious to grade them. They also asked what would be done with the information from the session.

At the close of the session, the students cleaned up the room. Dishes were stacked and pencils and paper collected. The facilitators informed me that they had not asked the students to clean up; the youngsters initiated these behaviors on their own. The return trip on the van might be characterized as "raucous". The students were

clearly pleased and energized by the experience and as they left the van each one thanked me for the day's session.

CONCLUSIONS

A. Limitations

This study is obviously limited in applicability by the small number of subjects. These twelve students cannot be considered representative of the entire high school population, nor do their impressions represent opinions of all Abenaki students. Further, the study is limited by the time frame for data collection. The session was held on one day during one particular time in the school year. It is possible that external factors influenced the student responses as a result and that different responses would have been ascertained at a different time.

Nonetheless, this type of interactive, in-depth data collection leads to preliminary results which suggest areas for further exploration. These initial results are not to be viewed as absolute. Rather, I hope to pursue some of the areas and issues raised by the students in a future study.

B. Results

The data suggest an ambivalence these students feel about school. While genuine concern is raised about respect, belonging, hygiene, equality and control in their school environment, these students still express a desire to be in school. Dropping out was never mentioned in our sessions. Although clearly the students did not feel the school "belonged" to them in any sense, they still spoke glowingly about some teachers. Furthermore, they offered positive correctives in their statements. For instance, the concern about "no football" was later described as a need for the school to involve more kids in the athletic program. Interestingly, the very issues raised by these students are those addressed in the objectives listed for "Human Environment and Interpersonal Skills" by the local high school.

The period of adolescence is characterized by developmental needs which apply to all youngsters. Gayle Dorman (1981) describes these needs in relation to a school setting: 1) diversity; different kinds of opportunities for learning; 2) self-exploration and self-definition; 3) meaningful participation in school and community including a

role in making rules that affect them and an opportunity to take initiative; 4) positive social interactions with both peers and adults, looking to peers for companionship and to adults for affection, values and a sense of security; 5) competence and achievement; 6) structure and clear limits.

The needs described by Dorman and the perceptions expressed by the twelve subjects of this study are complementary; issues raised about respect and control by the youngsters are so vehemently charged because they are the very concerns all students need to process. These twelve adolescents cannot get a sense of belonging because they feel excluded from the activities in the school environment. Still, they stay in school and learn to negotiate their environment. As they view a system which in their minds characterizes them as inferior, they search for recognition outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior. They disrupt school activities in order to avoid defeat. Consequently, they feel the brunt of a discipline policy which they internalize as victimizing. The repeated conmments about the unfair practices of some teachers are an indication of frustration. To these youngsters, teacher behavior determines whether or not they are allowed to gain a sense of competence. While these students bristle at a

few instructors, they praise others. This ambivalence reflects the struggles these youngsters undergo as adolescents trying to define themselves and establish a sense of belonging.

The reactive mode in which these students express themselves in school as evidenced by constant references to demerits, suspensions and expulsions is in sharp contrast to their behavior during the session. Not once were the students out of control. Instead, they were fully engaged in an interactive process. They eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to explore, discuss and analyze, becoming proactive learners in the process. By promoting an experiential base which allowed these youngsters to modify certain assumptions about themselves, we encouraged productive behavior. Through a group process model which validated student perceptions, these youngsters were empowered. They were convinced that their participation could lead to more command over the school environment. In this setting, twelve Abenaki youngsters thrived.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Initially, I would like to replicate this study with other samples of the student population, beginning with

other Abenaki students. This would provide a further indication of the perceptions of low SES students including those who may not be as disenfranchised as my original sample. An interesting contrast and comparison would be supplied by sampling athletes, honor roll students, and other subgroups within the school. The array of data gathered from these various groups could serve as a valuable climate barometer for the school administration.

Another arena for further exploration is to examine the teachers characterized positively by the students. What practices and qualities enable these teachers to reach students?

Follow up sessions with this particular group of twelve students could also provide valuable information. I plan to share this report with the youngsters, at which time other activities could be incorporated.

VALUE OF STUDY

Aside from the data collected regarding student perceptions, this study served as a valuable experience for the students themselves. They left the session feeling very empowered. It was a unique opportunity for them to express some of the frustrations they feel in school. They were able to see themselves as valuable people who functioned in a socially acceptable manner throughout the session. They were able to interact successfully with other students in a

productive activity, demonstrating the ability to be both respectful and respected.

The importance of listening to students is often neglected. Some observers demonstrate a lack of respect or interest in student views; others find that surveying and studying the adults in the school environment is easier and more expedient. I found the students in this study to be sensitive, insightful and informative.

Interestingly, the concerns expressed by the youngsters are echoed by others in their respective positions. For instance, teachers sometimes are frustrated by a lack of control, equality and respect in their dealings with administration. Shared decision making and cooperation are key factors in any sphere. It would seem that in this particular school the system operates to separate groups of students and create alienation between some students and some teachers. We are all social beings and as such have a need to succeed and belong. A learning experience took place on Friday, May 8th which left all participants feeling positive. When people are empowered and allowed to express themselves in an environment of respect, a sense of unity and belonging results.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Borg, W. and Gall, M. Educational Research; Longman Press, 1963.

Brookover, W. et al. Creating Effective Schools; Learning Publications, 1982.

Coleman, J. et al. Equality of Educational Opportunity; US Government Printing Office, 1966.

Dorman, G. Middle Grades Assessment Program; University of North Carolina Press, 1981.

Firestone, W. and Herriott, R. "Do Elementary Prescriptions Fit Secondary Schools?", in R. Carlson and E. Ducharme (Eds.) School Improvement - Theory and Practice; University Press of America, 1987.

Jencks, C. et al. Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America; Basic Books, 1972.

Johnson, D. and Johnson, F. Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills; Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Lincoln Y. and Guba E. Naturalistic Inquiry; Sage Publications, 1985.

Lindelow, J. and Mazzarella, A. "School Climate", in R. Carlson and E. Ducharme (Eds.) School Improvement - Theory and Practice; University Press of America, 1987.

Moos, R. "Educational Climates", in R. Carlson and E. Ducharme (Eds.) School Improvement - Theory and Practice; University Press of America, 1987.

Neufeld, B. et al. "A Review of Effective Schools Research: The Message for Secondary Schools", in R.Carlson and E. Ducharme (Eds.) School Improvement - Theory and Practice; University Press of America, 1987.

Persell, C. "The Consequences of Teacher Expectations", in R. Carlson and E. Ducharme (Eds.) School Improvement - Theory and Practice; University Press of America, 1987.